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PERCEPT AND OBJECT IN COMMON SENSE AND
IN PHILOSOPHY

II

THE COMMON SENSE DOCTRINE AND THE PHILOSOPHER

BEFORE turning to the philosopher, I may be permitted to say a word about the man of science. It need be but a word, for I hardly think that it is worth while to point out in detail that the men who occupy themselves with the special sciences do not, in acquiring the specific knowledge and skill required of them, come to discard the plain man's treatment of percept and object as something easily outgrown, and to be regarded as the product of a blundering ignorance.

We may freely admit that the man who has never occupied himself with psychology gives little attention to percepts as such, while the psychologist may give them the closest attention; the one may never have asked himself expressly the questions to which, as others see him, he appears to be constantly furnishing answers, while the other lives in an atmosphere of sharply drawn distinctions. Nevertheless, can we hold that the psychologist rejects any of the distinctions dimly recognized by his less scientific neighbor? Does not he, too, accept both percept and object? Does he not recognize their independent variability? May he not raise questions as to the time and place of the percept, refusing to accept the time and place of the external occurrence perceived as furnishing the answers that he seeks?

And is either the psychologist or the worker in any other science which is concerned with the observation of things ignorant of the rôle played by the brain and organs of sense in the perception of objects? Does he not quietly accept the fact that we know things only as we know them? And does he not, in spite of all this, hold that "things," objects, and not merely percepts, are presented in his experience? Does he regard it as impossible to describe things "as they are"? Does he find it hopeless to attempt to distinguish between mere changes in percepts and real changes in "things"?

The common-sense doctrine does not appear to meet with criticism and to suffer a recasting at the hands of the man of science, as such. It seems to be accepted in all its articles. If common sense is inconsistent, so is science, as far as concerns the point at issue. It is only when we come to the philosopher that we find a genuine sifting of the material, and a conscious acceptance or rejection of the positions which are taken instinctively by less reflective men.

I shall discuss this work of the philosopher in a moment, but first I permit myself to call the attention of the reader to the remarkable fluctuations of interest which make themselves apparent to one who views thoughtfully the public that interests itself in philosophy. There is nothing precisely like it in the field of science, I think.

To be sure, scientific discoveries are always exciting attention and interest. The new is, as is natural, much discussed. It may be immensely significant for human knowledge. Sometimes a door is thrown open that gives novel and even startling glimpses into the treasure-house of the universe. Thus, the accidental by-product of a physical investigation in the laboratory at Würzburg, seized upon and subjected to scrutiny by an acute and trained intellect, results in a blaze by the light of which the complexion of things is surprisingly changed. We are introduced, if not into a new world, at least into regions of our old world hitherto uncharted and even undreamed of.

If the public interest in such a discovery wanes; if men say less about it than they did a few years before; it is not that men have come to the conclusion that the discovery was unimportant. It is that the new truth has been added to the store of old truths which are valued, but which do not occupy the center of attention because men are seeking to make some further addition to the store. They may be accepted more unquestioningly than they were at the time when they were most eagerly discussed.

Such achievement in the discovery of the indisputably new, which may come to be the indisputably accepted, seems to beckon less encouragingly to the philosopher. Again and again philosophies have arisen which have claimed, and have appeared, to set nature and man in a startlingly new light. There has been an illumination—a quite sufficient blaze to set men running and shouting. But has not experience taught us that, after a little time, the fire may be expected to die down, and to take a not exceptionally prominent place among the other small fires scattered over the horizon, at the one or the other of which this or that group of men may be found warming the hands and cheering the eyes? There is usually some fire which occupies the center of attention and creates more or less of a disturbance. In the general public interested in philosophy there seems to be something like a permanent weakness for running to fires. But it is rarely the same fire that draws the crowd for many years together. Quite recently we have seen this fact illustrated in our own country, where what was a veritable stampede has given place to comparative indifference, and those who had faced excitedly in one direction seem about ready to seek a new center of excitement.

To the reflective it seems not unnatural that there should be such fluctuations in the public interest and attention. The philosopher, as such, is not a man who is dealing with new facts. He is not one who has, by some happy chance, wandered into a wholly undiscovered country. The material with which he works is the common stuff of human experience, and the distinctions which he tries to make clear are distinctions of which the implicit reason of mankind has long had to take account. If, when the philosopher brings us his revelation, he himself neglects to take account of that implicit reason—if he treats human experience as though no one had enjoyed it before him—he may interest us, charm us, startle us, dazzle us; but he can scarcely leave with sober men a permanent conviction of the supreme value of his message. Reflection is no new thing; the materials which it must use are not something quite recently brought to light. That men should think they have made a really important discovery when their attention has been caught by some aspect of experience upon which they have not seen emphasis laid before is to be expected. That they should find other aspects of experience soon acting as a damper to their ardor is equally to be expected.

And now for the philosopher's treatment of percept and object. A given philosophy may lay much stress upon one element in what has, in the last paper, been put forward as the common sense doctrine, and it may ignore or reject others. Whether this is just or not is, of course, a fair question; but it is surely a question to be decided only after careful reflection. We may not reject lightly what seems to be vouched for by the common experience of mankind. We may not ignore without a thought assumptions which appear to have their place both in common thought and in science, which work satisfactorily, and which lead, as far as can be seen, to no ulterior inconveniences or perplexities. That emphasis upon one element recognized in the common sense doctrine may lead to the denial or to the ignoring of another—that it may set one in opposition to some of the articles of the plain man's creed—seems to be revealed by even a cursory review of various well-known types of philosophical theory. Let me illustrate this.

I. Suppose that much weight is given to the principle that percept and object are ever to be kept distinct, that they vary independently, that the object may continue in existence when the percept has ceased to be. Suppose, furthermore, that one is keenly conscious that percepts must be regarded as, in some sense, a function of the constitution of the percipient creature. Suppose, still further, that one feels that one must hold on, at all hazards, to the *object*, and must keep intact the distinction of percept and object

with which one seems to start out in all one's dealing with things. What is the natural outcome of a reflection that concentrates its attention upon these points to the exclusion of others?

Has the matter not been brought before us again and again in the history of philosophy? What comes of "drawing within," one by one, all those things that can be immediately experienced, and of contrasting with them an ever-receding "object" which grows more and more indefinite and illusive as the reflective process grows more consistent and thorough-going? Does not this splitting apart of percept and object naturally result in such a dwindling and disappearance of the object that the apparently significant contrast of percept and object with which we started has been replaced by a distinction between what is given in experience and that unknown or unknowable something against which we have all in turn exercised our skill in polemic, and which it is the fashion to hold up to scorn?

Manifestly, a philosophy of which this is the outcome has not done justice to all the elements in the common sense doctrine. The plain man may claim that he never has had, and never can possibly have, any interest in such an object as this. The man of science may hold that no object which he has ever attempted to describe, and no object that the progress of science can ever attempt to reveal, can have any relation to this so-called object. Does not this philosophy appear to have quite wandered away from the problem of percept and object as it presents itself in our common experience? Is it busied with a fictitious problem? Has it missed the whole point? Or is common sense in the wrong from the outset?

II. Suppose that a philosophy gives weight to much the same considerations as those dwelt upon at the beginning of the preceding section, but sees the futility of insisting upon an object that can not conceivably ever be an object to any one at any time. Suppose that it still recognizes the distinction of percept and object, but, in view of the considerations which have fettered its attention, it absorbs, so to speak, the latter into the former. Something like this was done by Berkeley, as we all know. He did not make the object identical with any single percept, but he refused to recognize its independence of percepts. In the percepts of some mind or minds it had its being.

And Mill followed in the same path. His "possibilities of sensation" have no blood in their veins save what they draw from percepts. In so far as one does not unwittingly turn them into "objects" of the unnatural sort discussed above, they appear to be nothing more than the shadows of percepts. Several men of science of our day, having wandered over into philosophy, have treated objects as did Berkeley. The object has become to them a something *composed* of sensations. On reading their utterances, we all

cry out "subjectivism!" and we hasten to show that their doctrine, brought to a clear consciousness of itself, must, in despair, destroy itself.

That they have laid stress upon certain things accepted as fact by common sense, no one can deny. But have they accepted all? Have they been guilty of misconception and exaggeration? Certainly their conclusions, expressed in plain, every-day language, appear incongruous and absurd. Men talk as though they treated sensations, ideas, percepts, in one way, and objects, in quite another. If the latter are really composed of the former, the same stuff, precisely the same, why this difference of treatment? How about the independence, or relative independence, of the object, accepted in common sense and in science? Is it not simply ignored in these subjectivistic philosophies? Yet the rôle played by this independence, both in common life and in science, seems altogether too important to be ignored.

III. Subjectivism appears to be, for the time being, in eclipse. Even the idealist, however unwilling he may be to write himself down a subjectivist, is told to draw his blade and stand on guard. Rather an aggressive band of realists has arisen to champion the object—more than that, to champion its actual presence in experience. What is given in experience is not, on this view, a representative, a copy, an indication, of the object; it is the object itself. Consciousness must not be regarded as a something that intervenes, a veil that covers and disguises the "thing." The thing is *there*; it is *given*; its immediacy is as assured as is that of anything else in our experience.

In writing these sentences, I am describing what seems to me to be a present-day tendency sufficiently marked in certain quarters. I am not attempting to define the position of a single writer, or to quote his words. The tendency is the extreme reaction against the subjectivism discussed above.

That it bases itself upon a principle recognized in common thought, and, as it seems, tacitly accepted by science, appears plain enough. Does not the plain man take it for granted that objects are directly given in experience? Does not the man of science assume that things can be observed and described? Does either find himself embarrassed by a veil or medium which disguises the object and puts it at one remove? Then, why not say simply that what is given is the object and leave the whole matter there? Why confuse things by talking about percepts and their variability? Why emphasize the senses and the central nervous system, and dwell upon the different guises under which objects present themselves to the same sense and to different senses?

Why? Because these stones of stumbling actually lie in our path and have to be gone around or stepped over every single day. They are commonplaces of our ordinary experience; they beset the scientific investigator at every step of his progress. Fatal to investigation they can not be, for investigations, scientific and unscientific, actually do go on, and end in results. The perplexing facts may be ignored in the sense that the attention may not expressly occupy itself with them. But they must be taken account of, in some sense, nevertheless. Are objects ever presented except under some guise? Has the guise no significance at all? If we deliberately reject all the "guises," what can the object mean to us? Common sense appears to accept tacitly all the guises, to recognize the significance of the conditions under which each is given, and yet to hold to the fact that the *object* is given—given as *object* and not merely as *percept*. Is it permissible for a philosophy to emphasize the latter of these positions at the expense of the former?

IV. Suppose that the philosopher lays much emphasis upon the pervasively volitional character of our mental life, and points out that the light under which men see the world is not independent of their desires and purposes. Is he not calling attention to a truth perfectly well recognized by men who are not philosophers? Common sense appears to accept without question the variability of the percept, and surely no plain man would deny that our choices from moment to moment have much to do with the aspects under which things are experienced. We can put ourselves in this or that position with respect to objects; we can, under the influence of permanent interests, come to embrace in our experience whole systems of objects which, had we not had those interests, would certainly never have attracted our attention, and many of which would, perhaps, never have been experienced at all. He who seeks, finds; he who elects to close his eyes does not see.

Even the interests and choices of those who have lived before us are not without significance for us. It is recognized on all hands, and not merely by the philosophers, that our problems are, to a great extent, set for us by others, and that others influence us to look for their answers in this direction or in that. Common sense, where it is in the least reflective, recognizes as much as this. Does any man doubt that, if I am not interested in a thing, it may pass by me unheeded? Does any man doubt that others may call my attention to things, to aspects of things, to the significance of things for human life?

In recognizing all this, is common sense doing anything more than recognizing the variability of the percept commented on above? Is it not simply accepting the fact that the desires and volitions of

men have something to do with the selection of the particular guise under which objects or systems of objects may be given in experience?

But does the fullest recognition of the significance of desire and volition in this field imply that common sense even tacitly admits that they have the same significance when we are dealing with *objects as such*? Could the plain man, could the typesetter, be possibly induced to accept the statement that our inattention to typographical errors really tends to make them "unreal"? Does the scientist ever dare to use such a principle in his dealings with an undesirable element in a compound which he is investigating? The concrete is the touchstone of abstract theories. The laying aside of a philosophical terminology, and the adoption of plain and simple language, may be, in effect, the discarding of a cloak.

If, then, a philosophy lays stress upon the fact that the character of our experiences may be accounted for, in part, by having recourse to the interests and choices of men, and, if it does no more, it seems to have proclaimed the secret of all the world, and to have brought no new revelation. But, if it does more; if it speaks a language which suggests to us that we can, by taking thought, add a cubit to our stature, does it not come into conflict with a doctrine as clearly recognized by common sense, and, apparently, as plainly revealed in our experience, as is that of the variability of our percepts and their relative independence of objects? That such a language has recently been spoken by some, can scarcely be denied. Must not he who belongs even to the moderate wing of such a party justify his statements in detail, and with constant references to concrete instances, if he would clear himself of the charge of subjectivism?

The common sense doctrine seems, then, to be many-sided. When the plain man insists that he perceives an object, now under this guise, now under that, and never under no guise at all, does he resolve the object into percepts, or deny its existence? When he recognizes the significance of his senses, of his desires, of his choices, does he repudiate the independence of the object? Does he ever put the object, as such, at one remove, and make it a thing never really "given" in experience?

Each philosophy commented upon above seems to have one foot on the common sense doctrine. But it appears to emphasize one element in it to the detriment of others. The several philosophies do not appear to be at one touching the element that should be emphasized. Has the philosopher, in each case, exaggerated one truth at the expense of others? or is common sense inconsistent, and in need of correction at the hands of the philosopher?

I have no intention here of putting forward any doctrine of my

own. What I have to say I have said elsewhere¹ as clearly as it is in me to say it, and there is little profit in mere repetition. I may, however, record the conviction that each type of philosophy commented upon above has recognized a truth, that each truth finds its implicit recognition in the common sense doctrine, and that it ought to be possible to do justice to these truths without falling into a tangle of inconsistencies. It is to be expected that, from such a mutual adjustment, there should emerge a doctrine more moderate and less striking—perhaps, less interesting—than what may be looked for where the distribution of emphasis has been more one-sided.

In closing, I may be permitted to dwell upon a point which seems to me to possess a greater importance than that which is usually conceded to it. It is that of the nature of the language which should be used even by the philosopher in discussing such problems as the one we have been considering.

I have said that the concrete is the touchstone of abstract theory. By this I have by no means meant to indicate that abstract theory is to be discarded, or that abstract and even highly technical language is in all cases to be eschewed. I suppose no cultivated man in his senses would wish to rob the mathematician of his system of symbols, or to denude other special sciences of a labor-saving terminology which has been coined with much thought and care, and which fixes generally accepted distinctions that might easily be lost were they not embalmed in certain words and phrases or even in what seem to the uninitiated cabalistic signs. And surely no one who has the slightest appreciation of the methods of science can feel justified in maintaining that trains of abstract reasoning should at every moment be interrupted by a precipitate descent upon the concrete fact which alone gives significance to every formula.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the concrete is the touchstone of abstract theory; and it is equally true that one runs a certain risk in coining technical terms and in entrusting oneself to the convenience of the abstract symbol. The danger is palpably greater in some fields of investigation than in others. It is, I think, greatest in the philosophical sciences, where the facts supposed to be dealt with when a writer uses this or that constantly recurring technical expression are by no means admitted by all competent judges to be facts at all.

In such cases a direct return to the concrete and to common and familiar forms of speech may not necessarily be a mere inconvenient interruption of a justifiable flight. It may result in an exposure of the truth that the flight should never have been undertaken at all; it may amount to a revelation that the word or phrase one is using

¹ "The World We Live In," New York, 1912.

is an empty one, or that the symbolic statement carries with it a misconception of the experience with which one is supposed to be dealing.

It is far harder to judge whether a man is talking significantly or not, when he uses a language which departs widely from that of common life, than it is when he employs the common phrases which have a meaning for us all. We do not habitually think in algebraic formulæ, nor can most of us check off readily the real worth of a statement when it is placed before us in such a form. The speaker may be saying something wise or he may not; it is not easy for us to say, and few take the trouble to find out.

In philosophy, I do not believe that the convenience of using technical and abstract expressions—where such can be avoided, as I believe they may, in most instances—can counterbalance the danger which one incurs in having recourse to them. In support of this statement I shall give but two illustrations.

Suppose one maintains: "Every element in the objective order of experience may conceivably take its place in the subjective order also;" and suppose the man to whom he is speaking adds: "And every element in the subjective order may take its place in the objective order." Is it as easy to judge whether one should give or withhold one's assent, as it would be if the first speaker had said: "Every aspect of every material thing can conceivably be known;" and the second had continued: "And everything that can conceivably be known—even my dream of last night, or the centaur which I am now imagining—may have its place in the material world"?

Again. We have seen the logicians examine such a statement as "that inkstand is black," turn it into " a is b ," and then ask themselves, with shakings of the head, what mystery of identity underlies the fact that a , which is a and not b , can still truly be affirmed to be b . Suppose we leave a and b and come back to the concrete statement. Is there any man, learned or unlearned, who, when he sits at his desk, and, raising his eyes, exclaims "that inkstand is black," ever means to assert that one thing, which is manifestly *not* some other thing, nevertheless *is* that other thing?

The formula is general and abstract. It fits, among others, such statements as "this horse is that cow," and "red is not red," in which case it expresses the absurd. But surely this has nothing to do with the judgments that men pass upon the colors of the things about them, and gives no indication of what actually takes place in their minds when they form judgments. When abstract formulæ seem to result in mystification, a descent upon the concrete is, as the physicians say, "indicated."

Now, in dealing with percept and object, we are not in a realm

which belongs exclusively to the few who have appropriated the latest discoveries of the sciences. We are dealing with what has its place in the realm of common experience. Men, plain men generally, are more or less at home in this realm, and we can not assume that generally received opinions are wholly to be disregarded. If we speak to such men in an unknown tongue, if we describe to them their familiar experiences in abstract and unfamiliar language, they will certainly not understand us, and any answers they may make to our questions can not be of service to us. It is quite likely that, by so speaking, we may prevent even our colleagues, who may have a language of their own, from understanding us, and that we may give rise to profitless discussion. It is not impossible that we deceive ourselves as well as others, contenting ourselves with words and phrases, when our whole endeavor should be to bring clearly before ourselves the most concrete and commonplace experiences, and to overlook none of their aspects.

GEORGE STUART FULLERTON.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY.

CONSONANCE AND DISSONANCE¹

THE facts of consonance and dissonance imply a large number of psychological problems: of sensory perception, of representation, of judgment, and of feeling—problems which, to a great extent, are capable of exact experimental analysis. In the historical development of these problems, the psychological point of view has but lately been differentiated from the metaphysical, the physical, and the physiological.

Helmholtz, on the basis of modern epistemology, first treated the subject in a purely empirical and scientific manner. Psychologically speaking, he left to us numerous intricate, but yet not hopeless tasks. His theory puts the main stress upon the harmonic *overtones*, their coincidences and mutual disturbances. Though modern criticisms of this theory, such as that of Stumpf and Lipps, overshoot the mark, the theory itself is far from being completely satisfactory. It does not explain the facts of tone-combinations with no, or with only a few, overtones.

Lipps's theory of unconscious rhythms is more metaphysical than scientific, and is not in accordance with ascertained facts. The theory of "fusion," held by Stumpf, is based upon interesting experi-

¹ This article is a summary of two lectures, given (with demonstrations) before the New York Branch of the American Psychological Association, and before the late meeting of this association at Cleveland.